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Lead Looming Larger in Local Consciousness

**By Melanie Reynolds
County Health Officer**

Lead – the heavy metal, not the verb – has captured headlines here in recent months because of its potential to harm people's health.

Last month, school officials closed C.R. Anderson Middle School because testing showed high levels of lead dust in certain parts of the building. The school re-opened several days later after more testing showed safe levels throughout most of the building. Specialists cleaned up the few areas with higher levels.

Last October, state employees moved out of the Old Armory Building at 1100 North Last Chance Gulch, after sampling found high lead dust levels there.

East Helenans are intimately familiar with the health concerns caused by lead. They've lived with lead contamination in soil and groundwater since smelting operations began along Prickly Pear Creek in 1888. The lead smelter closed in 2001, and several agencies, including the health department's Lead Education and Abatement Program, have been working to clean up the site and limit the impacts of lead on health.

But Helena residents may not have realized that they're vulnerable, too. You don't need a smelter in your backyard to be exposed to lead.

Health Effects of Lead

Lead occurs naturally and can be found in all parts of our environment – air, water, and soil. While it has beneficial uses, it can be toxic to humans. When it builds up in a person's bloodstream through long-term exposure, it can damage nearly every organ and system in the body.

Children under age 6 are especially vulnerable, because their growing bodies absorb more lead than adults do and their brains and nervous systems are more sensitive to its damaging effects. Babies and young children also are more likely to put their hands and other objects that can have lead dust on them into their mouths.

According to several studies, even low levels of lead in a child's blood over time can result in:

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- lower IQ and hyperactivity
- slowed growth
- hearing problems
- anemia

Pregnant women also should take extra care to avoid lead exposure, to protect their growing babies.

Eliminating exposure to lead and ensuring a healthy diet with enough iron, calcium, and vitamin C will help protect against lead poisoning and bring an elevated lead level down.

Sources of Lead

Most of the time, the lead levels we live with in the environment are not high enough to worry about. But there are times and places where it can become a health issue.

The two Helena buildings mentioned above both once housed shooting ranges. The lead dust found there most likely came from bullets fired during target practice.

Some other common sources of lead are:

- paint and dust in homes built before 1978 (when lead-based paint was banned);
- dust and soil outdoors;
- water pipes;
- old painted toys;
- dishes and imported pottery that contain lead;
- fishing sinkers;
- vinyl mini-blinds;
- some cosmetics; and
- hobby supplies (such as lead solder used in making stained glass).

Preventing Exposure

The most important thing you can do to prevent lead poisoning is to prevent exposure to lead.

Because Helena has so many fine old homes, lead is something you should consider if you plan to renovate or do home repairs. Federal law requires that you get specific information about lead if your home was built before 1978 and you plan to renovate more than six square feet of painted surfaces indoors or more than twenty square feet of painted surfaces outdoors. This information is available at www2.epa.gov/lead/lead-safe-certified-guide-renovate-right

Simple steps like keeping your home clean and well-maintained can go a long way toward preventing lead exposure. The Environmental Protection Agency offers these recommendations for reducing the chances of lead exposure in your home:

- Inspect and maintain all painted surfaces to prevent paint deterioration.
- Address water damage quickly and completely.

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- Keep your home clean and dust-free.
- Clean around painted areas where friction can generate dust, such as doors, windows, and drawers. Wipe these areas with a wet sponge or rag to remove paint chips or dust.
- Use only cold water to prepare food and drinks.
- Flush water outlets used for drinking or food preparation.
- Clean debris out of outlet screens or faucet aerators on a regular basis.
- Wash children's hands, bottles, pacifiers and toys often.
- Teach children to wipe and remove their shoes and wash hands after playing outdoors.
- Make sure you and your family eat well-balanced meals. Children with healthy diets absorb less lead.
- If you're having home renovation, repairs, or painting done, make sure your contractor is lead-safe certified.

The only way you can know for sure whether you have lead in your blood is to have a quick and simple blood test. Talk to your health-care provider if you have concerns.

Residents in East Helena can get free blood tests and free environmental assessments of their homes and yards through the Lead Education and Abatement Program, 457-8583, healthinfo@lccountymt.gov

More information about lead and its health effects is available from the EPA at www2.epa.gov/lead

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